

## Unit 4: Status

### Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

### Be aware of the following

- Determinants of status in Middle East societies
- Importance of context in determining many Saudi Arabian personal practices
- Prestige damaging impact of public humiliation
- Close ties between a man's honor and the virtue of his womenfolk

### Identify

- Shame
- Status
- Face
- Public traits of Saudi Arabian men of virtue
- Clan importance

### Realize

- Importance of "face" in Middle East cultures
- Low status of manual labor in Saudi Arabia
- Necessity of parental respect
- Some Middle Easterners may interpret the facts to suit themselves
- Practical discrimination occurring within Saudi Arabia
- Unwritten rules governing associations with those of low status in Saudi Arabia

## Unit 4: Status

### Status Determinants



In the United States we have status according to what we do--through actions which "earn" us more respect, authority and power. Therefore, we tend to identify ourselves by our achievements rather than by our family.

In the Mid-East, people gain status by being born into the right family. If God...Allah...did not want you to be important you would have been born into a poor family. And once you are born into status, you must...in a sense...protect your status from all challengers the rest of your life. If you fail...such as being successfully criticized in public or insulted...you lose some of your status and your family also loses. Occasionally all can be lost.

Social mobility, regardless of birth status, is beginning to appear to a degree in the Middle East but it is still very new.

While in the U.S. our status is connected to salary or control over more people, in the Middle East your status lies in your public "face" presented to the world and in appearances--personal dignity. For instance, white and blue-collar workers dress formally to go to work--keeping up appearances. At work the blue-collar worker changes clothes. Of course, the quality of suits and dresses and their cut allows most people to pretty well guess the real status, yet appearances are preserved.

In America a respected community leader, a general, a doctor, can wash his car, sweep his driveway, paint his house without hurting appearances.

In much of the Arab world they would not only think us mad, but might well lose all respect for us. For them it is shocking, even barbaric, to have anyone of importance do manual labor, whether at home or at work. This becomes especially significant when we get involved with training. In some countries where similar beliefs exist the use of special "lab" coats with insignia have circumvented traditional thinking and bridged the way to technical tasks.



Tied to these attitudes is the belief that HOW money is made is critical. The first action of a successful young professional son of a laborer in the Arab world is likely to be arrange for new jobs for all his family which do not involve manual labor. Then he is likely to move everyone-- brothers and their families, parents, sisters, cousins...to a new neighborhood and to begin arranging marriages for his relatives into a higher status, and finally he will likely start acquiring western symbols of success.

Yet, despite all his efforts, he and his relatives will always remain vulnerable to the deadliest insult of..."They're lower class."

As Americans, we need to remember if we are in their country to never wash our cars, clean our own floors, and so on, but instead to protect our status--and influence--by letting others do it for us.

**a. Face** The following aspect of much Arabic social interaction is considered by many to be a fault--the preoccupation with "face."

It is felt by many people in this region that what you do is not nearly as important as who sees you do it. In public, a man is expected to be reserved, restrained, balanced, stoic, generous, and helpful, and a woman is expected to be nearly invisible.



It is only in privacy, secluded among family and a few close friends, that people are really at ease. In this question of face, foreigners don't really count.

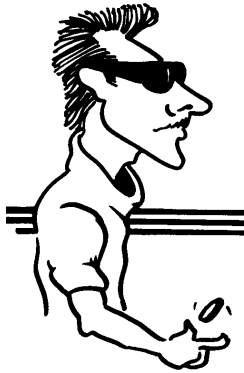


For example, a Saudi who would never be seen to so much as consider drinking a drop of alcohol in front of other Saudis might drink quite freely at an embassy gathering where he was the only Saudi present, or when he was out of the country. This is, of course, not true of every person in the Middle East, but it is sufficiently widespread that it is considered by many to be a general trait. "From one day to the next, the goal is not to get the job done, or even to acquire a fortune; rather it is to win prestige in other men's eyes and achieve a fame tantamount to a state of grace." (Iseman 1978:50).

A person's reputation is of utmost importance, reflecting not only on him personally, but on his whole family. The reputation of the family can be sabotaged by one errant member. It is partly for this reason that women are watched so closely and are under strict controls. A strong respect for the family and pride in its heritage is instilled in children from earliest childhood so that they will not be guilty of besmirching the family name.

Respect for parents is close to being a law of nature in this society. Heaven, it is said, is under your mother's feet, and your father is virtually unassailable. You should not smoke in front of your father or argue with him or even speak loudly in his presence. Every word and act should show

deference to him, and to actually strike a father would be considered a crime for which you could be jailed.



Every possible effort must be expended, throughout life, to avoid public humiliation. Because of this emphasis on what the world sees, when money changes hands between friends, it is best done in private.

For instance, if you are borrowing money from a friend, you would prefer that he give it to you when you are alone, and he, in turn, would prefer that you repay him under the same conditions. This would also be true if you had asked a friend traveling abroad to bring something back for you. If it is a small item, he will probably not accept money, but for more expensive items, or if he is buying many items for many people, he probably would take the money, but he would not want others to see him accepting it. Evidently, you never are so generous that you would not like appear even more so.

**b. Personal dignity** Unlike Westerners who revel in personal initiatives and achievements, Saudis (and Arabs in general) make considerable efforts to enhance their own individual dignity.

The status of many Arabs and preserving "face" is dependent upon the image they uphold in public. That is accomplished by adherence to a set of behavioral rules which collectively amount to virtue. The Saudi man of virtue is expected to be hospitable and generous (even to relative strangers), to uphold his personal honor and avoid shame (at almost any cost), to shun manual labor, and to uphold the code of sexual honor.



The Saudi sense of virtue (or propriety) can often be at odds with our own. The duties of hospitality and generosity usually equate to the offering of refreshments. However, the Saudi who wishes to obtain something from or through the

U.S. military member will bestow gifts and favors as a prelude to his request. Conversely, the Saudi who benefits from some official act of the U.S. military member may see that service as being generosity and so attempt to compensate for it.

As for shame in the traditional Arab sense, Raphael Patai (The Arab Mind) has defined it as "the psychological drive to prevent or quickly escape negative judgments by others."

The feeling of shame is so abhorrent that many Saudis will deny the truth, even when patently obvious, to preserve "face." Any threat to the Saudi sense of honor and dignity can lead to prolonged animosity.

The U.S. military member will quickly become aware of the Saudi aversion to manual labor. He himself can attend to some menial chores, like changing a light bulb or rerouting computer cables without loss of status in Saudi eyes. However, he should not make a habit of performing such chores in the presence of Saudis or other Arabs. Lastly, a man's honor is greatly affected by the virtuosity of his womenfolk. As a consequence of this mind-set, there is strict segregation of the sexes in public and severe punishments for illicit sex.

### c. Criticism



An important part of "status" in the Middle East is protecting it. When we, acting in an American pattern, directly criticize an Arab, try to "prove" him wrong with "facts," publicly evaluate his performance and trouble-shoot it, or accuse him of a wrong, he must, above all else, protect himself and his status.

Therefore, because of his code, you can expect him to react by:

- Interpreting the facts to suit himself.
- Denying your "facts" flatly<sup>3/4</sup>and perhaps honestly, for "facts" are culturally defined.

- Condemning or dismissing any of your conclusions which threaten him as completely illogical nonsense.

We are taught to believe there are "objective" facts, even when dealing with people. Despite our own "scientific" findings which indicate no one can perceive without subjectivity, we still believe in objectivity.

Many Arabs do not. "Facts" are what you see, what you experience, what you want to see. Therefore, if they are confronted with a threatened put down, they simply re-interpret the facts to suit their needs--which is perfectly correct within a code that stresses public appearances above all.



When it comes to something non-personal, such as machines, objectivity as we see it is also present with Arabs. However, when we tie the personal to the machine, we provoke defensive behaviors such as mentioned above. For instance, "What went wrong with that machine?" is preferred to "What did you do to that machine?" Or-- "The gear is broken," and not, "You broke the gear." "Perhaps we could repair this if we..." and not, "You've got it all wrong, this is the way..."

**d. Status and Prejudice in Society** The religion of Islam is rightly regarded to be egalitarian with respect to the status of believers.

Even so, religious egalitarianism is negated by ethnic discrimination within Saudi society. There is subtle prejudice against black-skinned natives--be they Arabs of mixed ancestry or descendants of former slaves or other immigrants from Black Africa.

Among the Bedouins, both nomadic and recently settled clans, there is a pecking order. Relative status is determined partly by genealogy and partly by politico-economic strength. The honored tribes are those which claim to have "pure" Arab blood, possess large herds, or control important trade routes.



The despised tribes are those which, due to sustained adversity, undertake some contemptible occupation.

Among both sedentary and nomadic clans, certain families traditionally fulfill the leadership role. This elitism, like the traditional prejudice mentioned above, at times contravenes military conventions relating to rank and discipline. An officer who comes from an ignoble tribe will probably have difficulty exacting obedience from his men.

Conversely, an NCO who comes from an elite family will very likely be treated as a commissioned officer by fellow tribesmen in service with him. In situations involving a breach of discipline, the lineage of the offender may well determine the severity or leniency of the punishment. Because of strong kinship ties, officers and enlisted men of the same clan or tribe associate freely, and almost exclusively with each other, during "off-duty" hours.



In the United States everyone has something to offer--even a laborer or a trainee. Americans have a tendency to believe that one can be a good pilot and "bad" man. One can be uneducated but know a particular subject. That doing for oneself is admirable and having friends from all walks of life is acceptable.



Persons of status in Saudi Arabia do not meet with individuals of lower status personally nor consult them on any matter. (Similar to early Western beliefs). Some serve, some are served. Even if it takes longer, status is more important than time. So one let's others carry, do for them, and does not consult lower status persons for significant information.



American: "I'd like to personally welcome any new trainee..."

Arab: "Ah, yes, you will make a speech to them." (as a group is implied, not one-to-one)

American: "I notice you have a lot of airmen doing odd jobs and cleaning up."

Arab: "Yes, of course. Those people, as you know, this is their kind of work."

American: "After his speech, the general could meet with the trainees."

Arab: "You think the general would want to do that?"

American: "I could meet with the villagers and we could perhaps understand each other better then."

Arab: "Yes, yes, of course, you visit. But you are our guest, an officer. They must show their proper respect to you, yes."

American: "I'll pick up the books on my way back. It's no bother."

Arab: "Oh, what do these people know, sir!"

## Review Quiz: Status

**Fill in the blanks** Fill in the blanks with the most correct word immediately following each section. Not all words listed will be used.

Americans often achieve status by what they

(1) \_\_\_\_\_. Middle Easterners gain status by being

(2) \_\_\_\_\_ into the (3) \_\_\_\_\_ family.

Status, a keeping up of (4) \_\_\_\_\_, is closely tied to personal dignity in Saudi Arabian circles.

In public, an Arab man is expected to be reserved, restrained, balanced, (5) \_\_\_\_\_ and

(6) \_\_\_\_\_. An Arab woman is expected to be nearly (7) \_\_\_\_\_. For many Middle

Easterners, (8) \_\_\_\_\_ you do is not nearly as

important as (9) \_\_\_\_\_ sees you do it. A person's

(10) \_\_\_\_\_ is of utmost importance.

(11) \_\_\_\_\_ in the Arab sense, is defined as "the psychological drive to prevent or quickly escape negative judgments by others."

In response to (12) \_\_\_\_\_, an Arab must, above all, protect his status. Facts may be reinterpreted to suit (13) \_\_\_\_\_.

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generous	buy	wealth	born
needs	who	Honor	Shame
reputation	violence	criticism	invisible
do	appearances	right	helpful
what	why	when	where

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With respect to the status of believers, Islam is

(14) \_\_\_\_\_. Yet, ethnic

(15) \_\_\_\_\_ can occur in Saudi society. Status may be determined in part by genealogy and politico-economic

(16) \_\_\_\_\_.

NCOs in the Saudi military may be treated as

commissioned (17) \_\_\_\_\_ by fellow clan members, and during "off-duty" hours may associate

(18) \_\_\_\_\_ with kin folk.

In Saudi Arabia, the adage "some serve, some are

(19) \_\_\_\_\_" applies. Persons of status will not meet or consult with those of (20) \_\_\_\_\_ status.

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egalitarian  
strength  
discrimination

officers  
freely  
king

higher  
lower  
served



"Building the Navy and Marine Corps of the 21st Century depends on the commitment and courage of each one of us-- whether we are wearing a blue suit, a green suit, or a gray flannel suit."

Secretary of the Navy, Honorable John Dalton